

## IS THE FAMILY PASSING?

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Theoretically, two things can happen to the family: it can remain very much the same as it now is in our society, or it can change. If it changes, it can change in either of two directions: it can lose its importance as a social institution, even gradually disappearing and being replaced by other institutions, or it can grow stronger and socially more significant.

An examination of our culture and its development indicates that the family can hardly be expected to remain as it is. In an age when practically everything is in flux, even the basic moral codes of our society, it is useless to think long of a far-flung institution like the family, which touches practically all phases of our lives, remaining isolated from the process of change. Then, again, if we use the experience of the past as a guide, the family may be expected to undergo changes inasmuch as changes have occurred in its nature and function in recent decades, these changes continuing even into our present time.

The facts of changes themselves, as well as the direction of these changes indicating somewhat the future fate of the family, may well be reviewed briefly in support of the statement that changes have taken place in the family and are still in progress. The significance of these changes for the future of the family will also be of interest.

One of the most evident changes in the last century is the transfer to other institutions of functions previously performed by the family. The industrial factory has largely taken over the making of cloth and of garments, the laundering and repair of clothing, the canning of foods and the baking of bread and pastries, and to some extent, the cooking and serving of meals, all of which were formerly the almost exclusive function of the family in its own home environment. The family has changed industrially from production to a consumption unit.

What does this transfer of industrial production mean to the family? Some

have feared that it means a definite step toward the ultimate dissolution of the family. An examination of the facts indicates that the transfer has meant that cloth, lint, looms and other materials with their noise and clatter have been taken out of the home to modern factories built, for the most part, to perform the work of manufacture under better lighting, ventilating and sanitary conditions than the home affords. If the increased leisure time provided by this transfer can be filled with cultural and wholesome recreational activities in the home, the change is a definite gain for the family in this respect. There is one way, however, in which the bonds of the family are weakened by this shift. The members of the family in our grandparents' day worked together very much as an industrial unit and were in constant close communication because of this fact. Unity of belief and attitudes among the family members was a natural result of this close association. On the other hand, members of the family of today often scatter widely in attending to their various duties and activities and usually come in contact with beliefs and attitudes which are very different from those of the family. Adoption of different viewpoints in this natural course of association leads to greater disharmony in the family than was true in former decades. I may point out here also, that this exposure to different viewpoints has some beneficial effect when it breaks the bonds of narrow prejudices which so often thrive in the isolated soil of a close family unit. While industrialization has broken the unanimity of family attitudes and opinions, it has also paved the way for greater tolerance of new viewpoints and thus for cultural change and progress in general. It is evident that the rural family which still works as a single industrial unit to some extent is less affected by the transfer to industry than is the urban family, although power farming, good roads, the auto and the radio are tending to close the gap of any

such difference between rural and urban families.

In a somewhat similar manner the family has been affected by the transfer of religion from the home to the church, of formal education from the home to the school, and of recreation to commercialized recreation agencies. But insofar as these new social institutions perform their tasks more effectively than the family did, the family is merely relieved of these functions and is free to replace them with added family services and enjoyments. Actually, the school is probably the only one of these three types of agencies which is doing better work with its assignment than was being done in the family. It does its work so well largely because it took over only the formal side of education to which it is adapted, leaving the informal part still chiefly in the hands of the family.

Religion seems to have gotten lost to a considerable degree somewhere in the transfer from the family to the church, and commercial recreation, although improving in recent years, leaves much to be desired in comparison with the home and neighborhood recreation of the age just past. While public community recreation is assuming a new and increasing role that has definite family value, one wonders if there is not still lacking to a considerable extent in both public community and in commercialized recreation the personalized element that made the family recreation of the past so satisfying to the individual. Family days at church and family picnics in parks and playgrounds are illustrative of constructive family activities since the transfer referred to has taken place.

The functions yet left to the family are the rearing of children and the emotional satisfactions of affection among its members. Because the family has so few of its earlier functions remaining, there are those who fear the family is passing to an unimportant and insignificant position among our social institutions. This viewpoint fails to take into account two very important facts. In the first place, the new conditions of society, especially the vast increase of anonymity and impersonality of relationship, have given greater emphasis to the need for affectional response of individuals on the personal basis of family life so that the remaining functions of the family, affection and

child-rearing, have greatly increased in relative importance. In a desert world of anonymity and personal indifference, the family is the one remaining oasis of personal relationship, solicitous attention and affection. It is quite possible that this affectional function of the family has already assumed such major importance that it not only overshadows the other earlier services largely transferred to other social institutions, but that it gives such present significance to the family as to make it more important than before.

The second fact to be remembered is that many of the functions, given up by the family have left more time and space for the family to concentrate its efforts on those peculiarly vital functions that remain to it.

The increasing number of divorces and separations of married couples has worried many people interested in family life. It seems likely that these separations denote increased emphasis on the emotional element in marriage inasmuch as couples separate when they are emotionally disappointed in marriage. Formerly, unhappy couples were generally bound to stay together because of the economic dependence of the wife and the expectation of the *mores* of society. But persons who separate today remarry. The proportion of the population married was never higher than today.

The present status of the family seems then to be that family life is more desirable than ever before, but personal undertaking the establishing of family relationships must find these relationship emotionally satisfying or they will sever them in the hope of making other and more satisfying attempts. The transfer of certain functions has meant that the family has changed, but it has not become less important.

The family has changed also with respect to authority. The patriarchal family rule has been giving place to equalitarian practice. Whereas, a century ago in this country a wife was legally a dependent of her husband, was denied admission to colleges, was not permitted to vote, and had very little voice in determining her own life much less that of her family, today all this has changed. Formerly husbands divorced wives but wives seldom divorced husbands, while wives today make the applications for

divorce against their husbands in about 70 per cent of the divorce cases.<sup>1</sup>

This increasing freedom of women no doubt contributes to the breakup of individual families which are not satisfactory, particular to wives. As cited above, however, this does not mean a decline of of the family as an institution so long as remarriage keeps the total per cent of married persons higher than it was before the change took place. It must also be borne in mind that marriage and family life that is maintained on a free and voluntary basis because people care for each other is a higher type of family relationship than that which is enforced by economic necessity as was true in many cases of the period previous to the present day.

Still another change in the family is the decrease in the number of children. The average number of children in the present day family is less than half that of a century ago, and the trend is for still further decrease. This is probably a greater hazard to society as a whole than it is to the family institution itself. Family life may go on even with an average of one child per family, but

population rapidly decreases on such a propagation rate. It appears that family limitation at present is affecting most the middle class of American society. Here young couples anxious to maintain their standard of living forego children until they become established in business or in a profession.<sup>2</sup> Then they settle with nature by having one child. It may be that Myrdal's criticism of birth limitation in Sweden has some appropriate application in America when it is said Sweden's radicalism, attempting "to adjust the size of the family to social malformations, did not materially readjust the malformations but led in the direction of extinguishing the human content of society."<sup>3</sup> The problem involved in the decrease of the size of the family concerns society probably more than it does the family. It seems likely that society must eventually be willing to make family economic conditions easier if it wants the family to yield more children. Certainly America has reason to be concerned about the survival of its sturdy middle class. The family is going on but it seems destined to be a smaller family unless some better provisions are made for it.

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of the Census, U. S. Department of Commerce, "Marriage and Divorce, 1931." J. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1932, page 20.

<sup>2</sup> See Folsom, J. K., *The Family*, Wiley & Sons, 1934, pp. 255-257, 265, and 266.

<sup>3</sup> Myrdal, Alva, *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy*, Harpers, 1941, p. 4.